

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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TAGS: MPOL, PN
SUBJECT: NATIONAL GUARD ADDRESSES TO BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

SUMMARY: IN PRESENTATIONS TO A BUSINESS EXECUTIVE' CONFERENCE, NATIONAL GUARD (GN) OPERATIONS OFFICER DESCRIBED PLANS FOR GN FORCE DEVELOPMENT AND STRESSED CAPABILITY TO PARTICIPATE WITH US IN CANAL DEFENSE. SECRETARY OF GENERAL STAFF, A MORE 'POLITICAL' OFFICER, SPOKE ON GN'S CONTINUING ROLE IN GOVERNMENT PROCESS AND NATION'S DEVELOPMENT, BUT DISAVOWED ANY GN MILITARY DEVELOPMENT WHICH WOULD DIVERT RESOURCES FROM OTHER PRIORITY NATIONAL OBJECTIVES. END SUMMARY.

1. FINAL SESSION OF ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF BUSINESS EXECUTIVES (CADE-78) MAY 24-26 WAS ADDRESSED BY LT. COL. ARMANDO CONTRERAS, ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF G-3 (OPERATIONS), AND LT. COL. ROBERTO DIAZ HERRERA, SECRETARY OF GENERAL STAFF OF THE GN. THE THEME OF THE CONFERENCE WAS PLANNING FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANAL AND CANAL ZONE BY PANAMA AFTER ENTRY INTO FORCE OF THE NEW TREATY; BOTH COLONELS' UNCLASSIFIED

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STATEMENTS THUS CENTERED ON GN PLANS FOR THIS FUTURE.

2. CONTRERAS, WHO HAS CONSISTENTLY SHOWN A GREATER INTEREST IN TACTICAL FORCE DEVELOPMENT THAN THE OTHER GN COLONELS, OUTLINED WHAT HE SAW AS THE GN ROLE IN CANAL DEFENSE AND ITS PLANS FOR FORCE DEVELOPMENT. CONTRERAS SPOKE POSITIVELY ABOUT THE

GN'S READINESS TO EXPAND AND PARTICIPATE WITH THE US IN DEFENSE OF THE CANAL. HE STATED THAT PANAMA HAD A BATTALION READY TO ASSUME THIS RESPONSIBILITY WHEN THE TREATY TOOK EFFECT. (IN FACT, THIS BATTALION, ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT BE ASSEMBLED FROM AVAILABLE GN TACTICAL UNITS, HAS NOT BEEN ORGANIZED.) CONTRERAS ALSO SAID THAT THE GN HAD DEFINITE PLANS TO EXPAND TO A FOUR-BATTALION LIGHT INFANTRY BRIGADE TACTICAL FORCE WITHIN THE NEXT DECADE. (THIS PLAN IS A CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE ON WHICH NO ACTION HAS BEEN TAKEN, NOR, WE BELIEVE, FORMAL APPROVAL GRANTED, BY THE GN TO DATE.)

3. DIAZ HERRERA, A COUSIN OF GENERAL TORRIJOS AND ALWAYS ONE OF THE MORE 'POLITICAL' OF THE COLONELS, SPOKE AFTER CONTRERAS AND PRESENTED A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT PICTURE. HE STRESSED THAT THE GN HAD BECOME AND FULLY EXPECTED TO REMAIN AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN THE GOVERNMENTAL, POLITICAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES. HE REJECTED THE IDEA THAT THE ARMED FORCES WOULD BECOME AN INSTRUMENT OF THE LEFT TO RADICALIZE THE COUNTRY (A DEVELOPMENT MANY OF HIS AUDIENCE HAVE FEARED, WITH DIAZ HIMSELF OFTEN NAMED AS THE PRINCIPAL POTENTIAL VILLIAN). BUT HE ALSO SAID THE GN WOULD NOT ACCEPT A RETURN TO ITS FORMER ROLE AS A PASSIVE INSTRUMENT IN THE HANDS OF

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THE PRIVILEGED AND POWERFUL TO SUPPRESS THE PEOPLE. RATHER, THE GN SAW ITSELF AS THE EMBODIMENT OF THE NATION, AND SAW THE NEED TO CONDUCT ITSELF IN A MANNER AND WITH POLICIES ACCEPTABLE TO ALL SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY.

4. DIAZ STRESSED THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S AND THE GN'S PRINCIPAL PRIORITY AT THIS TIME WAS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND AFFIRMED THAT THE GN WOULD REMAIN AN ACTIVE AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPANT IN THIS PROCESS. FOR THIS REASON, HE DISAVOWED THE IDEA THAT THE SCARCE DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES OF A SMALL COUNTRY SUCH AS PANAMA WOULD BE DIVERTED TO PURCHASE OF MILITARY HARDWARE; WHAT WOULD BE BOUGHT, HE SAID, WOULD BE ITEMS APPROPRIATE FOR USE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND THEY WOULD BE BOUGHT WITHOUT DIVERTING RESOURCES NECESSARY FOR OTHER PRIORITY NATIONAL TASKS.

5. FULL TEXTS OF THE FOREGOING STATEMENTS ARE CONTAINED IN FBIS/PANAMA PA 291610Y (CONTRERAS, 5 TAKES) AND PA 291952Y (DIAZ HERRERA, 3 TAKES).

6. COMMENT: THE OVERALL THRUST OF CONTRERAS' PRESENTATION COULD BE INTERPRETED--AND HE DOUBTLESS SO INTENDED IT--AS EVIDENCING A GN DESIRE AND INTENTION TO DEVELOP MILITARILY AT A FAIRLY RAPID PACE. HOWEVER, WE FEEL THAT A MORE ACCURATE ASSESSMENT WOULD BE TO VIEW IT AS AN EFFORT BY ONE OF THE MORE HAWKISH COLONELS TO IMPRESS THE BUSINESSMEN WITH THE GN'S READINESS AND CAPABILITY TO ASSUME A NEW ROLE. IN PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS, CONTRERAS HAS STATED THAT HIS PRINCIPAL CONCERN AT THIS POINT IS TO TRAIN THE POLICE WHO MUST BE READY TO PARTICIPATE IN JOINT POLICE PATROLS IN THE CANAL ZONE AFTER ENTRY INTO FORCE.
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GN DEFENSE EXPENDITURES REFLECT THIS ORIENTATION (DISCUSSED IN GREATER DEPTH SEPTTEL); PANAMA HAS FORMALLY REJECTED THE U.S. OFFER OF \$1-MILLION FMS CREDIT FOR FY 78 AND HAS NO SIGNIFICANT DEFENSE EXPENDITURES PROGRAMMED FOR THE NEAR FUTURE. THUS, WE BELIEVE THAT DIAZ' SPEECH, AND THE GN'S ACTUAL ACTIONS TO DATE, REFLECTED A RATHER DIFFERENT PICTURE THAN CONTRERAS SOUGHT TO PRESENT. DIAZ SEEMED TO PROMISE A RELATIVELY LOW EMPHASIS BY PANAMA AND THE GN ON TACTICAL MILITARY FORCE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS.
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